



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 31, 2013

By: Kalei Rupp

Alaska (11th Air Force) Rescue Coordination Center saves 2,000th life

CAMP DENALI, Alaska – Two hunters found themselves huddled over a fire in the middle of the woods, clinging to hope that help would arrive, after their small propeller plane crash landed outside of Talkeetna, Alaska, earlier this month.

Their rescue on July 1 would prove to be a significant milestone not only in their memory banks but with the search-and-rescue community as well.

"Your hope is in being found; I don't think I could have walked out of that area, and that's something I don't think people really take that seriously," said Bill Gough, the pilot of the downed aircraft from Vancouver, Wash.

Gough and his friend were rescued by the Alaska Air National Guard under command and control of the Alaska (11th Air Force) Rescue Coordination Center. He became the 2,000th life saved since July 1, 1994, when the RCC became manned solely by Alaska Air National Guardsmen under the operational active-duty commander of the 11th Air Force.

Since that time, the men and women of the Alaska Air National Guard have been keeping watch 24 hours a day, seven days a week, coordinating an average of more than five missions a week.

"We were extremely lucky and those guys did a bang-up job," Gough said. "It's a real wake-up call, and I just want to thank those guys."

Throughout the past 19 years, there have been more than 5,000 missions that have led to the 2,000 lives saved.

"People know that when they go out recreating that if they get lost or in distress, they can count on us to come and look for them," said Senior Master Sgt. Robert Carte, RCC superintendent. "Our mission is to provide a safe and timely response to aircraft events over the land mass of Alaska. In addition, we assist any other search-and-rescue agency should

they need military assets and coordination, so we're often involved with ground searches and missions in Alaska's waters as well."

Many survivors keep in touch with rescuers and find they form unbreakable bonds rooted from these life-and-death situations.

"Thank you would be the first thing that would come out of my mouth, but more than that, I feel like I owe it to them to keep in contact a little bit to let them know I'm recovered, and I'm taking ownership of my recovery and making sure that I get back to that 100 percent functional state," said Jake Collins, who was rescued in 2006 after a fall while sheep hunting left him unconscious for weeks and suffering from hypothermia and seizures. "It means the world to me that they were on call, that there was someone for my dad to call in the wee hours of the morning to get help out here and get me off the mountain."

It's a test of true heroism that rescuers put themselves in perilous situations to save another life, but they say, it's a fulfilling mission.

"We train all the time for this stuff, but at night we do sit and think about the gravity and intensity of the things that we all have to do," said Master Sgt. Roger Sparks, 212th Rescue Squadron pararescueman, Alaska Air National Guard. "I do it just because I think it's a very virtuous job to be able to do things that I've trained my whole life at; I've been in the military 20 years and to use those things for virtuous activity, to save other human beings, it gives back to you quite a bit."

"It's an extremely rewarding mission," Carte said. "We know the citizens and state depend on us, and it's not a responsibility we take lightly."

The RCC relies heavily on the support of other agencies during search-and rescue missions. Aside from the Alaska Air National Guard and Alaska Army National Guard, these agencies can also be called upon: Alaska State Troopers, U.S. Coast Guard District 17, Civil Air Patrol, National Park Service, North Slope Arctic Borough Search and Rescue, Alaska Mountain Rescue, SEADOGS K-9 Search and Rescue Team, Anchorage Nordic Ski Patrol and various other volunteer search groups.

"From helicopter crews to maintenance to surgical teams at the hospitals to everybody, it is a completely total team concept," said Master Sgt. Brandon Stuemke, 212th Rescue Squadron pararescueman, Alaska Air National Guard. "It takes everybody to get the job done and the mission accomplished. It's not about one individual; it's about everybody."

Although only the individuals in distress are counted toward the mission totals, survivors say the impact of the rescuers' actions reaches far beyond what can be measured with tally marks and save summaries.

"I was a life that was saved but also because I was saved I have two beautiful girls now and I have a lovely wife," Collins said. "It's the spider effect as it goes out and all the lives that are affected in addition to the one life that may have been saved."

###

To view this story in video format, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5yBibxj3V8&feature=youtu.be>

Photo Cutlines:

130710-Z-FZ583-002

An Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 210th Rescue Squadron is on a training flight July 10 in Southcentral Alaska. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Lt. Bernie Kale/Released)

AACAward

Alaska Air National Guardsmen with the 11th Air Force Rescue Coordination Center accept the 2013 Alaska Air Carriers Association Emergency Response Award Feb. 13, 2013. The RCC was recognized for its outstanding contribution to commercial aviation safety and its response to numerous aviation incidents throughout the state. Pictured left to right are: Robert Lewis, FAA Alaska Region Administrator; Maj. John Morse, RCC deputy director; Master Sgt. Ken Bellamy, RCC controller; Staff Sgt. Tiffany Alexander, RCC controller; Tech Sgt. Michelle Gillett, RCC controller; Senior Master Sgt. Rob Carte, RCC superintendent, and Mike Stedman, president of Alaska Air Carriers Association. (Photo by Rob Stapelton, Medallion Foundation)